

**THE CORE NARRATIVE OF OUR FAITH: DELIVERANCE; EXODUS 14: 19-31;  
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Does God care? Isn't that what we really want to know? I remember years ago when I was playing Division III college football (50 pounds heavier and 50 years younger) and I asked that question when our neighboring college one hour to the east, Marshall University, lost their entire football team and coaching staff in an airplane crash. It hit close to home in my 19 year old heart and mind. I imagined our team and coaches lost in an instant like that. How could such a thing happen?

I asked that question when our four-month old great nephew, the son of my sister's youngest daughter died of SIDS one night five years ago. SIDS is a placeholder for a mystery, for a void of explanation or reason why an infant leaves this world. As I watched the emotional turmoil my sister and her daughter and her family were thrown into I wondered how such a thing could happen and I wondered where God was when that little boy stopped breathing.

I confess in my own marriage and family life, in my parenting times when I've felt my back against the wall, come up short with answers or remedies for my own suffering or that of a family member and asked what felt like a cold, empty abyss, "Do you really care God, if you're out there?"

We are living in times that raise that question in spades: an unrelenting pandemic, a nation in turmoil and division over racial inequity, fears of impending fiscal collapse, major unemployment and growing poverty, homelessness and hunger, an absence of leadership from elected officials, and a growing distrust among Americans of news and information from reliable sources and the flourishing of misinformation and unfounded conspiracies among millions of Americans that threaten our democracy.

As we sputter toward what looks like chaos I ask myself that question about where God is and does God care.

We could not have imagined the current circumstances even a year ago. Sure there was division in the country; yes, there was a president many felt was ill-equipped and unfit for office; but that was before COVID-19, George Floyd, skyrocketing unemployment, widespread poverty and on and on. We used to ask the question 'Can it get much worse?'. We now know the answer, 'Yes it can!'. Makes you wonder what kind of God is reigning supreme and sovereign from the precincts of heaven.

I invite you to join me today and this fall as we consider God's people in the wilderness; today, *their backs* against the wall, facing death by Pharaoh's army; and in the weeks ahead stories of doubt and fear among the people that they were alone and left to their own devices in a hostile world with ruthless, powerful enemies.

Ask any Jew what the core narrative of their faith is, what their hope is grounded in and they will tell you this story, the Exodus—God rescuing God's people from slavery, God coming to them in the wilderness, God answering their need, God teaching them to depend upon him and not their flimsy fertility gods or leaders with silver tongues. That, is where their hope and strength and faith come from. This is a God who will deliver his people again from death on a cross.

We know the story well. Moses lifts his hand, the sea parts, the caravan of God's people moves over dry seabed *and then* the waters fall back and take the lives of Pharaoh's army as they prepare to decimate the people.

Virtually every commentator advises the reader of this text to forget the 'realistic' explanations for how this could have happened; that's not the point; the point is God *does care* for the poor and oppressed, cares for those with whom he is in covenant, for those who help to usher God's kingdom into this world. Does God care? *Yes, God cares!*

When the waters part and the people march through to the other side of the sea and dry land and the waters recede and Pharaoh's chariots and weapons are engulfed by the sea the people, says the biblical writer, "feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses....And the prophet Miriam took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them, 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'"

Easy, right? The people are in trouble, God steps in and saves the day. Everyone believes in God. End of story? Not really. Next week and the week after they'll have their backs against the wall again and they'll be complaining to Moses and wishing they never left Egypt, blaming him for leading them astray into this wasteland and death. And guess what? God intervenes once more, twice more, many times more.

There's a cycle of doubt and belief here until finally what they learn in the wilderness, what the wilderness teaches them is to depend upon God, not just when they're in trouble but in the course of daily living, in terms of how they treat each other, even their enemies. They learn reverence for all of life; that's the gift of the 10 commandments.

The wilderness is the womb of their faith, it's where the Holy Spirit sends Jesus at the start of his ministry, it's where the people are born again, after slavery in Egypt, from fear and doubt, from worshipping Egypt's gods, they learn to worship Yahweh. They enter the wilderness divided and doubting and exit faithful and united, clear about who they are and what their mission is.

The strange lesson today is that the thing we think God should protect us from becomes our salvation. 40 years wandering the wilderness, suggests it's a tough lesson to learn. We're hard-headed people, we don't easily give up the illusion of being in control of our lives or the life of our church or our nation. And we question God's motives, caring at the drop of a hat.

But once we've discovered that God does care, there's another big question that follows—What *kind of God* is this anyway?! He's not some softy Grandpa in the sky or "cosmic bellhop," as C.S. Lewis referred to one popular misconception of God, who provides whatever we ask, whenever we ask it. If that were the case Pharaoh's chariots would never have gotten out of the garage to terrorize the people.

This is a God who cares and who intervenes but also who honors our free will, who never abandons us, who is in relationship with us and who holds us accountable. This is a God, Abraham learned, who gets angry and jealous; and who Job finally realizes dwells in mystery and orders life in ways that often confound us.

This is not a God to be trifled with, second guessed or buttered up to, nor who tolerates lukewarm commitment or taking second place in our hearts. This is a God who follows through on his plan and purpose. This is a God, unpredictable and unfathomable, yet unrelenting in devotion, love and loyalty to his people. He is a God in his own image not ours. And it is *his likeness in our hearts*, that recognizes and draws us to him.

That's what I am betting the ranch on—that this God of the Exodus, this God who raised Jesus from the tomb and conquered the ultimate enemy—death is precisely the God now as he was then and who will see us through our present wilderness.

There is much good news here to celebrate: not least of which is the new roof, steeple and spire soon over our heads; a campaign (still not over) that makes all of this work possible; partners on the East Side waiting for us to show up; a landmark music ministry at its pinnacle in over 80 years; youth and young adult education and ministry sprouting more green than I've seen in 20 years; we have more talent in this congregation than the New York Yankees bullpen; our staff could manage a Fortune 500 company.

But the question today is what kind of congregation will occupy this refurbished church? What I am saying today and over the weeks ahead is that we will find the answer to that question in *our wilderness*. The same social, economic, health and political issues that threaten our nation threaten this congregation as it does every congregation and college and non-profit in the country today.

And as poised as we are for leadership and bold ministry it will not happen if we do not relinquish the satisfaction we get from Westminster just as it is; business as usual. That is Egypt friends! That is death to this church or any church.

Oh yes, we are in the wilderness; and there is fear and doubt because the conversation that predominates committee and session agendas so far in this pandemic is about having enough money, and short of that making needed cuts to right size this church and its mission to fit our business-as-usual pocketbooks.

The last thing I want to preach about is money, but you need to know that we've been at the same annual goal of giving for the past three years and eek out that goal down to the last minute. There will be no more eeking out. There will be major cuts and reduction of full-time positions in a staff that is the brightest and best staff this church has had in decades.

We're like Israel crying about bread and water, which we know full well we cannot live without, but not trusting that it will be provided. I'm here to remind us today the wilderness can teach us new faith, the wilderness can teach new priorities of giving, the wilderness can clear our heads about what our mission is, and, yes, the wilderness can steel our backs when we think we are against some wall of a fiscal shortfall or don't have enough of this or that.

What we are dealing with in this pandemic and political turmoil is mission not money, confronting all the scary risk with trust, embracing the abundance of life we've been given and that is waiting to be lived not living small, shrinking back from what God has called us to do.

I said in my pastoral letter this week the work I am summoning all of us to engage this fall it doesn't matter what sermons are preached, prayers uttered, or hymns sung if it doesn't result in changed behavior. I should have said "transformed behavior." That's what God does with his people in the wilderness, he transforms them, because he cares. We can use this wilderness we're in to turn inward and retreat or to let God transform us like our predecessors did during the Great Depression and WWII and the upheaval of the 1960s; we did it again on 9/11 and 2008 when we lost half of our invested funds. Let's choose God's transformation again. Amen.